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Prosecutors say suspect committed arson, tried extorting billionaire family in Highland Park by threat of kidnapping



by Sam Borcia

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Eduardo Aragon, 25, of Highland Park, was arrested and charged with multiple felonies after prosecutors say he committed an arson fire at the home of a well-known family in the 200 block of Roger Williams Avenue in Highland Park before later trying to extort the family for \$80,000 with the threat of kidnapping. | Provided Photos



Prosecutors say a suspect committed arson at a billionaire family's home in Highland Park and then threatened to kidnap their daughter if they did not provide him \$80,000 in cash.

Lake County Assistant State's Attorney Dino Katris said a garbage can was lit on fire in the driveway of a house in the 200 block of Roger Williams Avenue in Highland Park around 3:25 a.m. on April 28.

The garbage can was filled with paint cans and other flammable accelerants. It

burned to the ground and damaged the home's lawn.

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A high-profile family owns and lives in the home. They are one of two known billionaire families who reside in Highland Park.

The husband founded a software company in 1997, which is now a publicly traded company with over 6,400 employees.

His wife is the managing partner of a family office management company that oversees private businesses and investments in various industries such as domestic and international payroll, filmmaking and commercial and residential real estate holdings.

The couple also owns a film production company that is involved in an active lawsuit with Blake Lively and other Hollywood actors.

Katris said the drama involved in that Hollywood debacle has received a lot of media attention.

On the same day of the arson fire at their residence, the wife received a text message from an unknown number that indicated a threat of kidnapping of their daughter if the family did not provide \$80,000 in unmarked, non-sequential bills.

The message referenced that the garbage can on their property was torched and that was a precursor to more serious harm if the demands were not met, Katris said.

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“If you fail to comply we will take [daughter’s name] hostage and she won’t make graduation, at that point we will ask for more money. If you guys are prepared to spend a hundred million to ruin the lives of Ms. Lively and her family we are sure you can spare a few for your daughter,” the message said.

A day later, an unknown number sent text messages to the family’s daughter with the same information that was sent to the wife.

Another message was sent on Thursday to the daughter identifying her college and the address of her sorority house where she frequently visits, Katris said.

“Okay, miss honor roll we know you’re at [address]. You guys are not untouchable. You can upgrade your security all you want and that still won’t

stop us. We are prepared to ruin all your lives over a little bit of money. The next fire we start will be from the inside,” the message said.

More text messages were sent to the mother and her daughter the same day that they had given them ample time to give them \$80,000 and they have taken great lengths to remain hidden, Katris said.

“We gave you guys time to consider our offer. Remember, no one is untouchable, not even you guys. You can have someone posted at night, you can leave the lights on, you can upgrade your security and we will still get by. Understand we took precautions to stay hidden and we are prepared to ruin all of your lives. We’re not asking for millions, just for eighty thousand dollars. That’s nothing to you people,” the message said.

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“We can do this the easy way and nobody has to know, all you guys have to do is drop off the money at a public location and we disappear, simple as that. If you’d like to go against us then so be it, we will not stop. The next fire will be from inside the premises, or maybe we can go to [daughter name]. Amputate a man’s leg, and he can still feel it tickling. Tell us, when your little girl is on the slab, where will it tickle you?” the message said.

The person sent another text message on Friday, this time to the husband,

informing him that the sender was the person who left the “present” outside his residence and that the next fire will be from inside.

The FBI coordinated with the Highland Park Police Department to use technology and warrants to isolate the sender.

Katris said law enforcement identified that the text messages were sent from the Highland Park Public Library.

Eduardo Aragon, 25, of Highland Park, was seen on surveillance video coming to the library parking lot at night and using the free Wi-Fi at the same time the messages were sent, Katris said.

Aragon confessed that he was the one who started the fire on the property.

Aragon admitted to going to the library and sending the messages over Wi-Fi and demanding the \$80,000 to not kidnap the family’s daughter.

He said he had been out of work for two years and needed the money, Katris said.

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Aragon was charged with one count of arson, six counts of intimidation and

one count of harassment through electronic communication.

“The defendant is dangerous. Setting a fire on the [family name] residential property in the middle of the night is dangerous. Fires are unpredictable and can spread very quickly,” Katris said.

“This occurred on the residential property in the middle of the night when the [name] family and their caretaking staff would be sleeping,” Katris said.

Katris also said that Aragon “put a price” on the lives of the family. “The defendant premeditated his actions and had the means and sophistication to find the phone numbers of these family members and then tried to shadow himself by using internet phone apps and public WIFI to avoid detection.”

The prosecutor said the messages were not only meant to serve the purpose of greed but also to invoke fear in the family, with Aragon researching where the daughter was going to school and how she could be taken against her will.

“The defendant took substantial steps to terrorize this family and he has succeeded in placing them in a constant state of fear for their safety,” Katris said.

The Lake County State’s Attorney’s Office filed a petition to detain Aragon pending trial.

Lake County Judge Michael Nerheim granted the petition and remanded

Aragon to the Lake County Jail following a detention hearing held Monday afternoon.

Aragon is scheduled to appear in court again on May 29 for a preliminary hearing.
